

Restoration of the Capitol at Corydon

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Corydon was the center of the stage of Indiana politics and Indiana government during the interlude of twelve years between the period when old Vincennes was the capital and the period since the capital was moved to the newly founded Indianapolis. From 1813 to 1825 the political capital of the state was the little hamlet in the hills of Harrison County, a very small settlement—a few score houses and a population of a few hundred. Corydon has never grown into a large city—it has no through railroad, no large buildings, no great factories, and no sensational news to attract attention to it; but in the twelve years when the town was the seat of government for territory and state, it became historic.

The reason why Corydon was made the capital is of some interest and presents some complications. Vincennes at that time was still the most important city in Indiana; but in 1809, when Illinois Territory was formed, Vincennes ceased to be the geographical center of the territory of which it was the capital. It was off to one side on the very border line of Indiana. A more central location was desirable. Corydon was not as accessible as it might have been, but it was not far from the center of population, being as near as any place could be to the halfway mark between the east and west borders, and halfway between the north and south borders of the settled area. Citizens of Brookville, Lawrenceburg, and Madison on the east side, and Cannelton, Rockport, Evansville, Vincennes, and other settlements on the west could meet at Corydon as conveniently as at any other place.

In addition there was a political reason for the change. Governor Harrison, after the war with Great Britain broke out in 1812, was absent from the territory most of the time. He turned his official civil duties over to the secretary, John Gibson, who became acting governor. Governor Thomas Posey was appointed as Harrison's successor and took his office in 1813. Harrison's adherents were strongest in and around Vincennes. There was, moreover, opposition to Harrison, both personal and political. At that time it was headed by Jonathan Jennings, from 1807 to the end, a very bitter personal enemy of Harrison. Jennings had moved from Vincennes

to Clark County and had become recognized as the undisputed leader of the citizens of southeastern Indiana, opposing the Harrison faction on slavery, admission to statehood, and other issues. Jennings' influence would naturally work toward moving the capital from Vincennes. Possibly the cause of Vincennes was weakened by Harrison's withdrawal. At any rate the capital was moved to Corydon.

It used to be said that Indiana's first statehouse was built in 1811-1812, but investigations carried on within the last five or six years, indicate that it was not built so early.¹ The movement for a courthouse at Corydon was begun in 1811, but the ground on which the courthouse was built did not pass into the hands of the county until 1812. It seems probable that the building was not begun until 1812 or thereafter. Eventually the job of building it was given to Dennis Pennington, a prominent citizen of Corydon, as undertaker or contractor, and he did most of the construction. It is entirely probable that the territorial legislature never sat in the old courthouse. It was begun and built as the Harrison County courthouse, but it was understood that it would be used as a statehouse when the capital should be moved to Corydon. Certainly, the legislature, beginning in 1816, met in this Harrison County courthouse, which became Indiana's first state capitol.

The building was not entirely finished until 1821, for there is an entry in the county commissioners' records of that year to the effect that a committee was appointed to see whether the contract had been carried out satisfactorily. The committee reported adversely, there being some matters that needed to be changed. Apparently that was done, as there was no other entry made.

After the state government was transferred to Indianapolis in 1825, this building was used as the courthouse of Harrison County for three generations or more. During that time many changes were made and in 1873 there was a general remodeling and extensive reconstruction of the building. With the quickening of historical interest in Indiana, especially in connection with the state centennial, a movement was started

¹ A fuller and more detailed account of many of the matters discussed here is given in George S. Cottman's *The Corydon State House*, Publication No. 94 of the Department of Conservation (Indianapolis). The matter now presented first formed a portion of a paper, entitled "Two Restorations: The First State Capitol and the First State Constitution", which the author read at a meeting of the Southwestern Indiana Historical Society at Evansville, March 17, 1933.

to have the state buy the building and preserve it as a memorial of territorial days and early statehood. In 1917 the General Assembly passed a bill making an appropriation for the purchase of the building. While the state then acquired title to it, it was used as the courthouse of Harrison County for some ten years longer. Finally in 1925 the custody and care of the various historical memorials was entrusted by an act of the General Assembly to the Department of Conservation. It was not until 1929, however, that a small appropriation was made for the restoration of the old State Capitol at Corydon to its original condition.

The maintenance of places and buildings as nearly as possible in the condition in which they existed when of historical importance and their restoration when conditions demand it, are interesting and important fields of historical work. They are of interest, not only to architects and people who deal with buildings, but to anyone who likes problems and their solution. The solution of problems always makes a peculiar appeal.

One of the first problems was to find out what the building had looked like in 1816 before changes should be made. One of the first questions arose in connection with the material used for the floor. One old resident was sure it had been covered with tan bark; others maintained that it was made of flagstones. An investigation was necessary, so, in 1929 workmen were employed to rip up the wooden floor. They found dirt just beneath the wooden floor, but it was not trampled down as it would have been if used as a floor and there was no sign of tanbark. They dug down about two feet and found flagstones. That worked in well with another find, namely, that the level of the ground around the old building had been raised. There was no drainage or sewage system in Corydon when the building was erected and the floor level was practically the same as the ground level. When the street level had been raised for purposes of better drainage, water was thrown down into the courthouse grounds. Then the ground around the courthouse had been filled to a level which would prevent water from standing about the building. That necessitated raising the floor level, so the flagstone floor had been covered with dirt and a board floor laid above.

The solution of the first problem threw light on others. The architect of the restoration had commented on the fact

that the width of the fireplace was out of all proportion to its height. When the original floor level was found and the dirt fill taken out, the height of the fireplace was correspondingly increased and resumed its correct proportions. The Department of Conservation was persistent enough, and lucky enough, to find the original mantel which fitted the fireplace perfectly.

It was very apparent, also, that the size of the windows on the first floor had been changed at some time, and the windows widened. When the outside and inside levels were restored, it was found that the windows had been shortened, that is filled in at the bottom with stone which matched the rest of the building, and widened to give the necessary amount of light.

Next it was discovered that the door was out of proportion and the outline of the original door was ascertained. When the Department of Conservation began its work there was simply a plain opening for the door, but there was no transom. The opening showed changes in masonry. It was found that a resident of Brownstown, Jackson County, had the original fan or transom which had been taken out in 1873, and she now presented it to the state. The rest of the door was made to match and it was thus restored to its appearance of 1816. A description of the courthouse, written before it was remodeled in 1873, confirmed the correctness of the restoration.

No description and no illustration of the building before 1873 made certain exactly what the cupola was like. For that, the Department of Conservation fell back upon the expedient of copying the cupola of a courthouse in Ohio built about the same time as the one at Corydon. There can be no perfect restoration of any old building that has been destroyed or that has been remodeled, because there are details that escape every observer; but as nearly as can be, the old statehouse at Corydon, Indiana, by painstaking and intelligent historical research, has been rebuilt so that anyone can go there today and see it substantially as it was when the first session of the state legislature met in 1816.